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ABSTRACT

Development of the information "superhighway" has spawned a number of political, economic, and educational issues and has raised concerns that information inequities are increasing the polarization of society. Among the economic and political issues/concerns that have been raised are the following: whether information is a commodity or a public resource; whether commercial providers can be relied on to extend services to high-cost or remote areas; whether technology will facilitate or deter development of a direct participatory democracy; and what constitutes basic information rights and how those rights should be distributed. In the area of education, the information revolution and creation of the information superhighway have necessitated redefinition of the concept of literacy. Also needed are adult and career education and training conducted using up-to-date equipment, lifelong training to keep up with rapid technological change, information literacy programs for adult basic education and homeless learners, and programs to reduce computer anxiety. (An annotated list of 28 print resources dealing with political, economic, and educational aspects of the issue of access to information is included.) (MN)

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Access to Information: To Have and Have Not Trends and Issues Alerts

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TRENDS AND ISSUES ALERTS

by Sandra Kerka
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Access to Information: To Have and Have Not

Beneath all the "superhighway" metaphors and the cyberspace hype lie some serious issues about the social and economic impact of the so-called information revolution. Although computers seem to be everywhere, the people owning or having access to them at home, school, or work fall into certain categories: 30% of the U.S. population (Ratan 1995); 74% of those with incomes over $75,000 ("TechnoMania" 1995); 26.9 million whites, 1.5 million blacks (Stuart 1994); 49% of college graduates with children, 17% of high school graduates with children (Furger 1994); and 26% white children, 10.6% black children, 9.6% Hispanic children ("Special Topic Issue" 1994). Not only are there disparities in computer ownership but also in the capacity to access online information: only 13% ever go online, only 2% for 1 hour per day ("TechnoMania" 1995). Phone lines are essential for online services, but 7 million U.S. homes (Ratan 1995) and half the world's population (Holderness 1993) have no phones. Few rural areas have fiber optics or access to an Internet node (National Public Telecomputing Network 1994). Why does it matter? Access to information is being called "*the* civil rights and economic rights issue of the 21st century" (Stuart 1994, p. 73). A number of political, economic, and educational issues are raising concerns that information inequities are increasing the polarization of society.

Economics. Is information a commodity or a public resource? There is a rush to commercialize or privatize the Internet, and the National Information Infrastructure (NII) legislation promotes competition while asserting the government's duty to ensure availability of information resources at affordable prices (National Telecommunications and Information Administration 1994). Commercial providers are less likely to offer less economically viable services and to extend service to high-cost or remote areas. Electronic redlining—wiring the most profitable areas first or exclusively—is a reality (Ratan 1995; Stuart 1994). Other economic issues include provider concerns for liability (Perritt 1992); better employment opportunities and earnings for those adept at technology ("TechnoMania" 1995); and *quality* of access—some areas lack good connections, sophisticated search tools are expensive (Baker 1994; Bollag 1991).

Politics. Some envision technology as a way to bring about direct, participatory democracy. However, as more and more government information and elected representatives go online, people without access may be further denied a political voice. The NII promotes the conflicting goals of competition and universal service (a basic set of essential services for civic, economic, and social participation). Consensus must be reached on what constitutes these basic information rights and how to distribute information resources equitably (Doctor 1994; Weingarten 1994). Solutions proposed include guaranteed public spaces or "electronic commons" (DeLoughry 1993); minimum level of service subsidized by contributions from telecommunications providers (Lewyn 1994); and an expanded role for public libraries, traditional providers of information for all (Kranich 1993; Library of Congress 1993).

Education. The concept of literacy in an information-based democratic society must be redefined (Mason 1994). Above and beyond access, quality of use depends on education and training (Kazlauskas and Iehl 1993). Although many schools have computers, they are often outdated or there are too few, especially in poorer schools. Parents and community play an important role, because computer proficiency is strongly related to access *outside* of school ("Special Topic Issue" 1994). Information anxiety is another barrier to access: besides haves and have-nots are the choose-nots who resist using technology (as many as 55% classified as "technophobes" in a recent survey ["TechnoMania" 1995]). The attitude of others is "I don't mind that the rest of the world passes me by as long as I can still earn a living" (ibid., p. 53). Adult and career education have important roles to play: continuous and lifelong training to keep up with rapid technological change; programs to entice choose-nots and technophobes; information literacy for adult basic education and homeless learners; and, because computer anxiety often results from early conditioning, emphasis on sex equity in computer use and information skills as essential career skills.

Resources

Baker, D. "Small Kansas Town Fights for Rights to Ride the Superhighway." ***Nation's Cities Weekly*** 17, no. 23 (June 6, 1994): 7.

Hill City, Kansas, is being kept off the information superhighway (ISH) by an outdated telephone system and other technical barriers. The more profitable areas will get access first.

Bollag, B. "The 'Great Equalizer.'" ***Chronicle of Higher Education***, June 29, 1994, pp. A17, A19. (EJ 486 692)

The ISH's promise of empowerment is hampered by difficulties in gaining access, especially in developing countries and members of the former Soviet Union.

Browning, G. "Thomas Jefferson Meets Big Brother." ***National Journal*** 26, no. 6 (February 5, 1994): 338.

The argument that the ISH will bring about a true "Jeffersonian democracy" is criticized.

Cooke, K., and Lehrer, D. "The Internet." ***Nation***, July 12, 1993, pp. 60-64.

Giving private interests control over network connections means they could control access by charging by amount of logon time or data transferred.

DeLoughry, T. J. "Guaranteeing Access to the Data Highway." ***Chronicle of Higher Education***, November 3, 1993, p. A23. (EJ 472 927)

Proposes seven principles for an information infrastructure: free access, information rights, electronic commons, free marketplace of ideas, equity, privacy, and public involvement in network policy.

Doctor, R. "Justice and Social Equity in Cyberspace." ***Wilson Library Bulletin*** 68, no. 5 (January 1994): 34-39. (EJ 478 027)

Political, economic, and knowledge-based power is at the roots of the debate surrounding the information infrastructure. Only government actions can ensure equitable distribution.

Furger, R. "Unequal Distribution: The Information Haves and Have-nots." ***PC World*** 12 (September 1994): 30, 32.

The Learning and Information Network for Community Telecomputing on Long Island attempts to provide community bulletin boards and access systems for those who would otherwise have none.

Goldsmith, N. M. "Who Will Be in Charge?" ***Computerworld*** 28, no. 42 (October 17, 1994): 41.

Individual requests may someday be served by 10 million channels—a target market segment of one. Who will control format and content?

Holderness, M. "Down and Out in the Global Village." ***New Scientist***, May 8, 1993, pp. 36-40.

In the "new intellectual information order," the majority of the world may be denied access due to barriers that are economic, technological (especially language), and political (including gender bias).

Kazlauskas, E. J., and Iehl, R. E. "Use of Electronic Information Systems." 1993. (ED 363 340)

Among the changes wrought by the information revolution are its rapid proliferation, the manner in which people use information, and the nature of information itself. Accessing and using information have thus become more complex.

Kranich, N. C. "The Selling of Cyberspace." ***Library Journal*** 118, no. 19 (November 15, 1993): 34-37. (EJ 474 645)

An information infrastructure geared to mass markets will not serve individual information needs well. Technically sophisticated libraries and librarians are the keys to access for many.

Lewyn, M. "The Information Age Isn't Just for the Elite." ***Business Week***, January 10, 1994, p. 43.

In the past, government regulations on telephones allowed higher rates for businesses to subsidize service for poor and rural areas. A similar plan is needed for the NII.

Library of Congress. ***Delivering Electronic Information in a Knowledge-Based Democracy***. Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1993. (ED 366 292)

The public policy agenda for the NII should include updated regulations, equitable access, protection for intellectual property, privacy and security, and support for digital libraries.

Mason, R. O. "Convergence and Community." ***EDUCOM Review*** 29, no. 2 (March-April 1994): 47-49. (EJ 481 803)

Every member of a community has an inalienable right to be an interactive node in that community's digital network, but three conditions are necessary: connectivity, guaranteed information rights, and individual capability to use it.

Muffoletto, R. "Schools and Technology in a Democratic Society." ***Educational Technology*** 34, no. 2 (February 1994): 52-54. (EJ 478 109)

Access to information must also include access to ways of thinking about information and ways of knowing.

National Public Telecomputing Network. ***Rural Information Network***. Cleveland, OH: NPTN, 1994. (ED 372 884)

Describes a proposal to establish Freenets in rural areas that lack access to Internet nodes.

National Telecommunications and Information Administration. ***20/20 Vision: The Development of a National Information Infrastructure.*** Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1994. (ED 369 404)

Papers by telecommunications specialists include "Balancing the Commercial and Public Interest Visions of the NII" and "The Promise of the NII: Universal Service Is the Key."

Perritt, H. H. "Tort Liability, the First Amendment, Equal Access, and Commercialization of Electronic Networks." ***Electronic Networking*** 2, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 29-44. (EJ 453 313)

Considers network provider liability, the rights of information suppliers and consumers, and whether First Amendment immunities apply.

Ratan, S. "A New Divide between Haves and Have-nots?" ***Time***, 145, no. 12 (Spring 1995 special issue) pp. 25-26.

Access to the information superhighway may determine the basic ability to function in a democratic culture. Local, small-scale efforts are being made to serve those without home computers.

"The Role of Adult Education in an Information Society." ***Adult Learning*** 6, no. 2 (November-December 1994): 22-30. (EJ 492 500-502)

Theme articles include "Don't Give Us the Grand Canyon to Cross" (Merrifield, Bell); "Country Roads and Superhighways" (Whitson, Day); and "The Promise of the Telecommunications Superhighway" (McCullough, McCullough).

Schiller, H. I. "The 'Information Highway': Public Way or Private Road?" ***Nation***, July 12, 1993, pp. 64-66.

The information superhighway will be an almost exclusively privatized landscape. The focus may be on "marketing and pacification."

Slater, R. B. "Will Blacks in Higher Education Be Detoured off the Information Superhighway?" ***Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*** no. 3 (Spring 1994): 96-99. (EJ 488 936)

Blacks are nearly absent from ownership of capital in the information society and are far less likely to be equipped to use and manipulate information.

"Special Focus on the Bill of Rights and Responsibilities for Electronic Libraries." ***EDUCOM Review*** 28, no. 3 (May-June 1993): 18-47. (EJ 465 744-748)

Addresses the rights and responsibilities of educational institutions and citizens to computing and information resources. Suggests that, like libraries, institutions have the right to allocate access based on their mission and financial constraints.

"Special Topic Issue: Information Resources and Democracy." ***Journal of the American Society for Information Science*** 45, no. 6 (July 1994): 349-421. (EJ 488 230-236)

Includes "Access to Information Technologies among School-Age Children" (Martinez) and "The PEN Project in Santa Monica: Interactive Communication, Equality, and Political Action" (Rogers, Collins-Jarvis, Schmitz).

Strommen, E. "Ask Not for Whom the Road Tolls." ***Electronic Learning*** 13, no. 8 (May-June 1994): 26-27.

In deciding what constitutes basic information services, policymakers should consider what is the information equivalent of dialtone telephone service.

Stuart, R. "High-Tech Redlining." ***Utne Reader*** no. 68 (March 1995): 72-73.

The Federal Communications Commission is being asked to investigate the practice of electronic redlining—avoiding high cost or less profitable areas to wire with fiber optics.

"TechnoMania: The Hype and the Hope. Special Report." ***Newsweek***, February 27, 1995, pp. 24-77.

Includes "The Internet? Bah!" (Stoll); "The Haves and Have-nots" (Hancock et al.); "Putting Your Best Fear Forward" (Marriott, Gegax); and "The Myth of Cyber Inequality" (Samuelson).

Weingarten, F. W. "Walking the Tightrope." ***EDUCOM Review*** 29, no. 2 (March-April 1994): 18-21. (EJ 481 795)

Discusses access to the physical infrastructure, access as a service provider, information rights (privacy, intellectual property, freedom of speech), and public/private issues.

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